

## CÉRÈS THROUGH THE RUSSIAN INLAND WATERWAYS, Part 2

### Thierry J-L Courvoisier

*(In July 2016 Cérés and her crew sailed from Helsinki to St Petersburg, before continuing eastward through the Russian inner waterways with the intention of reaching Tromsø by early September. Flying Fish 2018/1 left them at Voznesenye on the shores of Lake Onega... Follow their movements on the chartlet on page 84.)*

We enjoyed a peaceful night in Voznesenye alongside a half-stranded steel barge. The following day, 31st July, was a beautiful day to sail north along the lake's western shore, with southwest force 4-6 on flat waters and bright sunshine. We set off early for the long sail to Petrozavodsk, but it proved too far for a single day and the shore along which we sailed was devoid of human settlements and covered by a thick forest. We spotted a well-protected cove, however, where we could anchor for the night. It was large, calm and almost circular, but rather shallow so we had to stay in the middle. The forest was everywhere, except for a few houses on the northern strand. One other ship was at anchor in the bay, soon joined by a flotilla of smaller boats equipped with fishing gear that appeared from nowhere when the sun went down. As elsewhere on these waters, none of them came anywhere near us or made any sign of even seeing us. The sun set in glorious colours, the wind died completely, the forest was quiet and not a sound was heard.

We reached Petrozavodsk the following day. Although it is the departure point from which boats and hydrofoils carry tourists to Kizhi, an important site we were to visit a few days later, there is no harbour. Vladimir\* had told us to tie up at a naval

*Cérés in Voznesenye*





*Surrounded by forest on  
the western shore of Lake Onega*

museum run by Victor Leonidovich Dmitriev. We had also been warned that, while the approach to the museum pier is in relatively deep water, there are underwater obstructions which are neither visible nor marked in any way. I was therefore rather nervous while approaching, until our phone call to Victor was answered and a man – who turned out to be Victor – appeared at the end of the quay and started to make signs indicating the course to follow towards the pier while avoiding the obstructions, somewhat like airport staff guiding docking planes. This was successful and we arrived without incident.

The 20m long wooden pier was poorly protected from the lake by a few rusting wrecks. A rather odd ship was moored on the other side – it reminded us of a galleon from times past: very high on the water, short and broad, with two masts and a long bowsprit. In some ways the presence of such a ship was not a complete surprise in a museum. More surprising was the fact that she looked ready to sail. Indeed a man

\* Vladimir Ivankiv, Port Officer Representative for St Petersburg and an essential contact for any cruiser hoping to traverse the Russian waterways – see page 88.



*Wrecks protecting the museum pier*

came on deck and told us that they were preparing to leave the next day for Kizhi, where a sailing school was about to open. He was very helpful, and drove me and some jerry cans to the nearest fuel station so we could fill our tank. We also took our empty gas bottles for filling at a nearby gas plant, where the smell of gas was pervasive and somewhat worrisome. At first the staff were unsure about our request, but eventually they were convinced and refilled the bottles. Getting water, which we also needed, was more difficult and impossible anywhere near the pier and museum. Tap water was, we were told, not potable even when boiled!

Our new friend told us that he had been among the first crew to circumnavigate the Scandinavian peninsula. When the Belomorkanal, which we would sail along a few days later, was opened to civilian navigation in the early 1990s as a consequence of Perestroika, he had set sail on a boat built by a group of enthusiasts from the region. They sailed north, reached the White Sea through the canal, sailed the Barents Sea to North Cape, then southwest along the Norwegian coast, into the Baltic Sea to St Petersburg, up the Neva River to Lake Ladoga, and back home along the Svir River.

Petrozavodsk is a medium-sized city of some 260,000 inhabitants, the capital of Russia's Republic of Karelia, and a hub for tourists travelling to Kizhi. There is an

interesting museum in the centre of the city, where one learns about the geography and history of Karelia, a large region that spans the northwest of the Russian Federation and the eastern part of Finland. One reads there that the city was founded and prospered in the 18th century following a decision by Peter the Great to establish an arms and ammunition factory. Hence the name of the city – 'the factory of Peter' in Russian. Its location was chosen



*The maritime museum pier in Petrozavodsk*





### ***Lenin is still in good shape in Petrozavodsk***

as being safe from attack from the Baltic Sea, upstream to facilitate transport to St Petersburg, and within easy reach of iron ore and coal, the main materials to manufacture weaponry. The history recounted by the museum terminates at the end of the 19th century, the events of the last 100 years being conspicuously absent and replaced by rather uninteresting folklore. It is as if the recent history of that region is still too fresh and the wounds too raw for the population to have come to terms with it.

Opposite the city museum is a pleasant building hosting some Ministry, in front of which a lorry carrying a water cistern was stationed. Women who were obviously secretaries and administrative staff in the

Ministry emerged from their offices in high heels and tight dresses to fill tea kettles at the cistern. Drinking water was also available in the supermarkets, however, in 5 or 8 litre bottles. We filled the boot of a taxi with them, and repeated this wherever possible during the following weeks to keep our water tanks topped up.

There were two big and aggressive dogs on the museum premises where we were moored. Victor warned us that although they were harmless while he was around, they would attack and could kill somebody at night after he had left. We were therefore told to not leave our boat under any circumstances between evening and morning.

When Victor offered to show us around the museum we expected a rather dusty collection of possibly rather

### ***Collecting drinking water in front of the Ministry***



uninteresting local tools and objects. Victor guided us to a large wooden platform half floating and half ashore, where it had been washed up by a storm, which reinforced my feeling that, were the weather to turn bad, *Cérès* would be neither protected nor safe. The interior of the wooden shed that stood on the half-stranded barge was indeed dusty, and showed old photographs on the walls. The story these objects told was, however, most astonishing. The first photograph we were shown depicted Victor, some years younger, forcefully handling the massive tiller of a wooden ship. The picture had been taken, he told us, on another home-built boat they had sailed to Svalbard. It had an open deck, no engine, but oars, and their only communication equipment



was an old hand-powered radio. So intense was the thirst for discovery among the people on this lake shore that, as soon as it became possible in the 1990s they sailed by all possible means out into the world, and to the most hostile waters.

***A younger Victor at the tiller en route to Svalbard***

On their way back from Svalbard the group led by Victor grew somewhat mystic

and decided to pursue their efforts towards openness and love between peoples, and therefore to sail to Israel in order to visit Jerusalem. For this adventure they built three boats, this time in the Viking style, each equipped with a single mast and square-sail. Once ready they organised a baptism ceremony for their ships in which church dignitaries and Boris Yeltsin\* took part. They then sailed off, south this time, to the Volga, Moscow, the Black Sea, Turkey, and east to the end of the Mediterranean Sea. After completing their pilgrimage to Jerusalem they turned west, and sailed all the way to the Atlantic. There the project seems to have run into difficulties. Ukraine had become independent of Russia, and the Ukrainian members of the team claimed their independence from the project. They sold their boat leaving the others to struggle back to Russia, which they did without visas or paperwork.

Finally we were shown the next boat under construction, which looked somewhat like an 18th century ship. The hull was there in rough planks but the inside structures were barely started. It was the beginning of August, and their plan was to leave in October to sail around the globe, carried by the same ideals of world love and peace. In comparison with the adventures of our hosts in Petrozavodsk, our passages on a solid, modern yacht equipped with charts, electronics and winches gave the impression of being an amiable Sunday trip on a quiet pond. Our exchanges were concluded by the signing of mutual books, some Swiss wine and vodka, and flags and pictures.

\* Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin was the first President of the Russian Federation, serving from 1991 to 1999.



The following morning Victor appeared as we set off and waved us again through the unseen rocks and obstacles to the open waters of the lake. We crossed its northern part heading eastward, before entering a maze of long islands all oriented north-south between which a well-marked channel helped us find our way to Kizhi.

The main building in Kizhi is a large wooden church, which dominates the shore of a strait between two islands. There is a quay for the numerous visiting tourist boats and hydrofoils, and a small pier for private boats where we were expected to dock, but since there was not enough water for our draught we dropped anchor off the church. The weather was calm and warm, which encouraged all the crew to take a dip and spare the shower water. Swimming next to *Cérès* beneath this massive wooden church on a hot afternoon in the high latitudes of western Russia was an unexpected and very enjoyable experience.

As well as the massive church there are a number of old Karelian buildings which have been transported, rebuilt and put on display for visitors. A visit had been organised for us and was conducted by a young lady, Anna, with whom it was a pleasure to interact for some hours on that day and the next, while touring the island on rented bicycles. The nautical school opening took place while we were there. The style reminded me of scouting decades ago, although some nervousness could be felt, caused by a fatal accident in a similar camp some weeks earlier in another region of Russia.

Although some of us would have liked to stay longer, the long voyage ahead of us – which included rounding the northernmost coasts of our continent rather late in the season – encouraged us to depart for Povenets and the southern end of the Belomorkanal. This was a 12 hour sail, at first among the islands north of Kizhi, then up the long, wide arm of Lake Onega. The day began with pleasant, quiet weather and ended with a fresh, humid and cool southwesterly breeze.





*Cérès alongside an old patrol boat in Povenets*

Povenets is a poorly sheltered harbour open to the south, where we expected to find a long stone quay. Our contact there should have been Konstantin, the maritime security officer for the lake and the Belomorkanal, another person forewarned of our arrival by Vladimir. Konstantin was not available, however, so had provided the name of another person to call. That person was no longer in charge and had redirected us to Dimitri and Misha, who expected us but seemed to have little or no understanding of nautical practices. The quay was busy with a cargo ship being unloaded of gravel by a floating crane, and though there was room for us against the high stone quay the swell would have made it uncomfortable to say the least. We were therefore redirected alongside an old patrol ship in a somewhat quieter spot, but only 1.5m from a rusting, half-sunken wreck. We secured there after having carefully hand-sounded to ensure the grey-brown water did not hide some pernicious obstacle and after an old man who seemed to have some responsibility for the patrol ship had removed his fishing gear.

Once confident that *Cérès* would be reasonably safe for the length of our stay we were given a form by Dimitri, who requested payment for staying there and assured us that Konstantin would be back the next day to tell us all about the Belomorkanal.

We also asked him if it would be possible to get a taxi the following day to visit the surroundings – walking around the harbour led us to a few housing blocks a few hundred metres away, but not much more. Misha appeared in the late morning to tell us that no taxi driver was willing to drive us around but that he would do it himself, for which we were grateful as we wanted to visit Sandarmoh, where thousands of prisoners had been shot in the late 1930s. At that time prisoners from the various camps in the north of Russia were regularly shipped in – for example, from the Solovki islands to the mainland – assembled in the evening, robbed of all their clothing, transported by lorry to Sandarmoh and shot in front of open graves. They were mostly young men, some convinced almost to the end of the virtues of the Bolshevik system and thinking that they were victims of judicial errors in an otherwise benevolent system. One such story may be read in *Stalin's Meteorologist* by Olivier Rolin.

Sandarmoh is now a forest, in which many trees bear photographs of victims. The Soviet archives had been open for some time by the mid 1990s, allowing historians to locate Sandarmoh and to find the names of at least 6000 victims, now listed in a blue binder in a small chapel on the site. The forest floor is uneven, testifying to the incredibly large number of anonymous collective graves in the area. The forest is young, possibly dating from the period of Perestroika when the significance of the area was recognised. The photographs show young, bright faces – people who were prevented from contributing to the emerging society that many of them had welcomed. A few monuments have been erected by communities, the Jews and the Poles for example, to commemorate 'their' victims. Modern Russians resent these, because they suggest

*Sandarmoh forest, where thousands of prisoners were shot in 1937 and 1938*





that Stalin's purges were aimed at identifiable communities, whereas we were told on several occasions that the police and political actions had not differentiated between the origins or religions of the victims. Erecting these monuments now seems to be used as a political message, fostering tensions between modern Russia and the communities for whom the monuments stand rather than remembering the suffering of a whole people. We saw very few people on the site, which is barely indicated from the road. The archives were opened and the memory awakened some 20 years ago, but the book has closed again, with the site left to its quiet sadness.

In the meantime Konstantin was expected to arrive in the evening, and our guide organised a barbecue to take place on the quay in the wind and rain. Misha explained that he, Dimitri and another associate rent the harbour facilities from the State for the equivalent of some €30 per month, and may organise whatever activities they deem appropriate and financially rewarding. Hence the gravel unloading and their careful counting of the lorries that came and went. He told us of bold plans to build better protection for the harbour and to dredge it to depths able to host yachts – plans that seemed wildly over-ambitious for the handful of boats that pass by every year, although the berthing fee they charged us amounted to not far from their monthly rent of the quay and facilities, of which there were none.

Late that night, after several hours spent standing in the cold drinking beer and eating grilled chicken, Konstantin finally arrived. We saw a massive, powerful man emerge between the headlamps of a large car to bring more food and vodka. The fire was reanimated and the evening went on for several more hours. A rendezvous was finally agreed for the next morning so that we could obtain the instructions we needed to sail the canal.

This done, in the morning Konstantin insisted on taking us to visit nearby Medvezhyegorsk, with its train station and forts overlooking the lake built by Finnish prisoners in the 1940s. Following this we could not leave before trying Konstantin's *bagna*, the Russian equivalent of a sauna, in his home. This involved not only fire and steam but also large quantities of vodka. During a long afternoon and evening we learned, among many other things, that the worries of the Russian people deal much more with local considerations like water quality and sewage than with the importance of Russia on the world stage, that the activities undertaken in the harbour do not lead to any significant development for the region, and that the lake is safer when the old patrol boat alongside which we were moored stays at the quay. There was enough time also to meet the officer responsible for other aspects of regional security before hiring a taxi back to Cérès in the middle of the night.

Next morning we were free to leave Povenets for the first lock, just a couple of nautical miles away.



There is little man has made that approaches anything in nature,  
but a sailing ship does. There is not much man has made that  
calls to all the best in him, but a sailing ship does.

Allan Villiers